

*Tract No. IV. of the Society for the Promotion of
Permanent and Universal Peace.*

EXTRACTS

FROM

The Writings of Erasmus,

ON THE

SUBJECT OF WAR.

— One murder makes a villain;
Millions, a hero. Bishop Porteus.

— O what are these,
Death's ministers, not men, who thus deal death
Inhumanly to men, and multiply
Ten thousand fold the sin of him who slew
His brother : for of whom such massacre
Make they but of their brethren, men of men?
Paradise Lost, Book XI. line 675.

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EXTRACTS

FROM

ERASMUS.

If there is in the affairs of mortal men any one thing which it is proper uniformly to explode; which it is incumbent on every man, by every lawful means, to avoid, to deprecate, to oppose; that one thing is, doubtless, WAR. There is nothing more unnaturally wicked, more productive of misery, more extensively destructive, more obstinate in mischief, more unworthy of man, as formed by nature, much more of man professing *Christianity*.

Yet, wonderful to relate! in these times war is every where rashly, and on the slightest pretext, undertaken; cruelly and savagely conducted, not only by *Unbelievers*, but by *Christians*; not only by *Laymen*, but by *Priests* and *Bishops*; not only by the young and inexperienced, but even by men far advanced in life, who must have seen and felt its dreadful consequences; not only by the lower order, fickle in their nature, but above all by princes, whose duty it is to compose the rash passions of the unthinking multitude by superior wisdom, and the force of reason. Nor are there ever wanting men, learned in the law, and even divines, who are ready to furnish firebrands for the nefarious work, and to fan the latent sparks into a flame.

Hence it happens, that war is now considered so much a thing of course, that the wonder is, how any man can disapprove of it; so much sanctioned by authority and custom, that it is deemed impious (I had almost said heretical) to have borne testimony against a practice, in its principle most profligate, and in its

effects pregnant with every kind of calamity. If any one considers a moment the organization and external figure of the body, will he not instantly perceive, that Nature, or rather the God of Nature, created the human animal not for *war*, but for *love* and *friendship* ; not for mutual *destruction*, but for mutual *service* and *safety* ; not to commit *injuries*, but for acts of *reciprocal beneficence*.

Man she brought into the world naked, weak, tender, unarmed, his flesh of the softest texture, his skin smooth and delicate, and susceptible of the slightest injury. There is nothing observable in his limbs adapted to fighting, or to violence. Unable either to speak, or walk, or help himself to food, he can only implore relief by tears and wailing ; so that from this circumstance alone might be collected, that man is an animal born for that love and friendship which is formed and cemented by the mutual interchange of benevolent offices. Moreover, nature evidently intended that man should consider himself in debted for the boon of life, not so much to herself as to the kindness of his fellow-man ; that he might perceive himself designed for social affections, and the attachments of friendship and love. Then she gave him a countenance not frightful and forbidding, but mild and placid, intimating by external signs the benignity of his disposition. She gave him eyes full of affectionate expression, the indexes of a mind delighting in social sympathy. She gave him arms to embrace his fellow-creatures. She gave him lips to express a union of heart and soul. She gave him alone the power of laughing, a mark of the joy of which he is susceptible. She gave him tears, the symbol of clemency and compassion. She gave him also a voice, not a menacing and frightful yell, but bland, soothing, and friendly. Not satisfied with these marks of her peculiar favour, she bestowed on him alone the use of speech and reason ; a gift which tends more than any other to conciliate and cherish benevolence, and a desire of rendering mutual services ; so that nothing among human creatures might be done by violence. She implanted in man a hatred of solitude, and a love of company. She sowed in his heart the seeds of every benevolent affection ; and thus rendered what is most salutary, at the same time most agreeable. For what is more agreeable than a

friend? what so necessary? Indeed, if it were possible to conduct life conveniently, without mutual intercourse, yet nothing could be pleasant without a companion, unless man should have divested himself of humanity, and degenerated to the rank of a wild beast. Lastly, to man is given a spark of the Divine Mind, which stimulates him, without any hope of reward, and of his own free will, to do good to all: for of God, this is the most natural and appropriate attribute, to consult the good of all by disinterested beneficence. If it were not so, how happens it that we feel an exquisite delight, when we find that any man has been preserved from danger, injury, or destruction, by our offices or intervention?

Now view, with the eyes of your imagination, savage troops of men, horrible in their very visages and voices; men clad in steel, drawn up on every side in battle-array, armed with weapons, frightful in their crash and their very glitter; mark the horrid murmur of the confused multitude, their threatening eye-balls, the harsh jarring din of drums and clarions, the terrific sound of the trumpet, the thunder of the cannon, a noise not less formidable than the real thunder of heaven, and more hurtful, a mad shout like that of the shrieks of Bedlamites, a furious onset, a cruel butchering of each other!—See the slaughtered and the slaughtering!—heaps of dead bodies, fields flowing with blood, rivers reddened with human gore! It sometimes happens that a brother falls by the hand of a brother, a kinsman upon his nearest kindred, a friend upon his friend, who, while both are actuated by this fit of insanity, plunges the sword into the heart of one by whom he was never offended, not even by a word of his mouth!—So deep is the tragedy, that the bosom shudders even at the feeble description of it, and the hand of humanity drops the pencil while it paints the scene.

In the mean time, I pass over the corn fields trodden down, peaceful cottages and rural mansions burnt to the ground, villages and towns reduced to ashes, the cattle driven from their pasture, innocent women violated, old men dragged into captivity, churches defaced and demolished, every thing laid waste, a prey to robbery, plunder, and violence!

Not to mention the consequences which ensue to the people *after* a war, even the most fortunate in its event: the poor, the

unoffending common people, robbed of their little hard-earned property: the great, laden with taxes: old people bereaved of their children, more cruelly killed by the murder of their offspring, than by the sword; happier if the enemy had deprived them of the sense of their misfortune, and life itself, at the same moment: women far advanced in age, left destitute, and more cruelly put to death, than if they had died at once by the point of the bayonet: widowed mothers, orphan children, houses of mourning; and families, that once knew better days, reduced to extreme penury.

Why need I dwell on the evils which morals sustain by war, when every one knows, that *from war proceeds at once every kind of evil which disturbs and destroys the happiness of human life?*

As I just now drew the portrait of man and the picture of war, so now it is my intention to compare war with peace, to compare a state most pregnant with misery, and most wicked in its origin, with a state profuse of blessings, and contributing in the highest degree to the happiness of human nature; it will then appear to be downright insanity to go in search of war with so much disturbance, so much labour, so great profusion of blood and treasure, and at such a hazard after all, when with little labour, less expense, no bloodshed, and no risk, peace might be preserved inviolate.

Now, amidst all the good this world affords, what is more delightful to the heart of man, what more beneficial to society, than love and amity! Nothing, surely. Yet what is peace, but love and amity subsisting between great numbers? And, on the other hand, what is war, but hatred and enmity subsisting between great numbers? But it is the nature of all good, that the more it is extended, the greater the good becomes, the more benign its influence; therefore if the amicable union of individuals is so sweet and so salutary, how much will the sum total of happiness be augmented, if kingdom with kingdom, and nation with nation, coalesce in this amicable union? On the other hand, it is the nature of all evil, that its malignity increases, the more it is extended; and therefore, if it is wretched, if it is wicked for one man to meet another with a sword pointed at his vitals, how

much more wretched and more wicked, that *thousands* and *tens of thousands* should meet in the same manner? By union, little things are augmented to a respectable magnitude; by disunion, the greatest fall to insignificance and dissolution. Peace is, indeed, at once the mother and the nurse of all that is good for man: War, on a sudden, and at one stroke, overwhelms, extinguishes, abolishes, whatever is cheerful, whatever is happy and beautiful, and pours a foul torrent of disasters on the life of mortals. Peace shines upon human affairs like the vernal sun. The fields are cultivated, the gardens bloom, the cattle are fed upon a thousand hills, new buildings arise, riches flow, pleasures smile, humanity and charity increase, arts and manufactures feel the genial warmth of encouragement, and the gains of the poor are more plentiful. But no sooner does the storm of war begin to lower, than what a deluge of miseries and misfortunes seizes, inundates, and overwhelms all things within the sphere of its action? The flocks are scattered, the harvest trampled, the husbandman butchered, villas and villages burnt, cities and states, that have been ages rising to their flourishing state, subverted by the fury of one tempest, the storm of war. So much easier is the task of *doing harm* than of *doing good*; of *destroying*, than of *building up*!

Many, alas! are the evils by which miserable mortality is tormented, worn out, and at last overwhelmed. We read of whole cities buried in ruins by earthquakes, or burnt to ashes by lightning, whole countries swallowed up in chasms occasioned by subterraneous convulsions; not to mention how many men are lost by casualties, which, by the frequency of their occurrence, cease to surprise; how many are drowned in seas and rivers, how many destroyed by poison, by falling, by other accidents.

Why should those who are obnoxious to so many calamities, go voluntarily in quest of an adscititious evil, as if the measure of misery required to be full to the very brim, and to run over; in quest of an evil, *not a common evil*, but *an evil, of all human evils, the worst and the foulest*; so destructive an evil, that alone, it exceeds them all in mischief; so abundant in misery, that it comprehends every kind of wretchedness within itself; so pestilential in its nature, that it loads men with *guilt* in proportion as it galls them with *woe*.

To these considerations add, that the advantages derived from *peace* diffuse themselves far and wide, and reach *great numbers* ; while in *war*, if any thing turns out happily, (though what can ever deserve the appellation of *happy* in war!) the advantage redounds only to a *few*, and those unworthy of reaping it. One man's safety is owing to the destruction of another. One man's prize derived from the plunder of another. The cause of rejoicings made by one side, is to the other a cause of mourning. Whatever is unfortunate in war, is severely so indeed, and whatever, on the contrary, is called *good fortune*, is a *savage and a cruel good fortune*, an ungenerous happiness, deriving its existence from another's woe. Indeed, at the conclusion, it commonly happens, that both sides, the victorious and the vanquished, have cause to deplore. I know not whether any war ever succeeded so fortunately in all its events, but that the conqueror, if he had a heart to feel, or an understanding to judge, as he ought to do, repented that he ever engaged in it at all.

Such and so great are the evils which are submitted to, in order to accomplish an end, itself a greater evil than all that have preceded in preparation for it. We thus afflict ourselves for the noble end of enabling ourselves to afflict others. If we were to calculate the matter fairly, and form a just computation of the cost attending war, and that of procuring peace, we should find that peace might be purchased at a tenth part of the cares, labours, troubles, dangers, expenses, and blood, which it costs to carry on a war. You lead a vast multitude of men into danger of losing their lives, in order to demolish some great city ; while the same labour and fatigue of these very men would build, without any danger, a more magnificent city, than the city doomed to demolition. But the object is to do all possible injury to an enemy. A most inhuman object, let me tell you! and consider, whether you can hurt him, essentially, without hurting, at the same time, and by the same means, your own People. It surely is to act like a madman to take to yourself so large a portion of certain evil, when it must ever be uncertain how the die of War may fall in the ultimate issue.

Where are there so many and so sacred obligations to perfect concord, as in the Christian religion? Where so numerous ex-

hortations to peace? One law Jesus Christ claimed as his own peculiar law, and it was *the law of love, or charity*. What practice among mankind violates this law so grossly as war? Christ salutes his votaries with the happy omen of *peace*. To his disciples he gives nothing but *peace*: he leaves them no other legacy but *peace*. In his holy prayers, the subject of his devout entreaty was principally, that, as He was one with the Father, so his disciples, (that is to say, all Christians,) might be one with Him. This union is something more than peace, more than friendship, more than concord; it is an intimate communion with the Divine nature.

Solomon was a type of Christ. But the word Solomon, in Hebrew, signifies the *pacific*. Solomon, on this account, because he was pacific, was chosen to build the temple. David was rejected as a builder of the temple, because he was a warrior. He was rejected for this, though the wars he carried on were against the wicked, and at the command of God; and though he, who afterwards abrogated, in great measure, the laws of Moses, had not yet taught mankind that they ought to love their enemies.

At the nativity of Jesus Christ, the angels sung not the glories of war, nor a song of triumph, but a hymn of peace: "Glory to God in the highest, on earth *PEACE*; good will towards men." The mystic poet and prophet foretold before his birth, (Ps. lxxvi. 2.)

"In the *CITY OF PEACE* (Salem) he made his dwelling-place: there brake he the arrows of the bow, the shield, the sword, and the battle-axe."

"He shall refrain the spirit of Princes; he is terrible to the Kings of the earth."

Examine every part of his doctrine, you will find nothing that does not breathe peace, speak the language of love, and savour of charity; and as he knew that peace could not be preserved unless those objects, for which the world contends with the sword's point, were considered as vile and contemptible, he ordered us to learn of him to be meek and lowly. He pronounced those happy who held riches, and the daughters of riches, Pomp and Pride, in no esteem; for these he calls the poor in spirit, and these he has blessed. He prohibited resistance of evil. In short, as the whole of his doctrine recommended forbearance and love, so his

life taught nothing but mildness, gentleness, and kind affection. Such was his reign; thus did *he* wage war, thus he conquered, and thus he triumphed. Nor do the apostles inculcate any other doctrine; they who had imbibed the purest spirit of Christ, and were filled with sacred draughts from the fountain head. What do all the epistles of St. Paul resound with, but *PEACE*, but long-suffering, but Charity? What does St. John speak of, and repeat continually, but Christian Love? What else St. Peter? what else all writers in the world who are truly Christian?

Whence then the tumults of War among the Children of Peace? Is it a mere fable, when Christ calls himself the vine, and his disciples the branches? Who can conceive a branch divided against a branch of the same tree? Or is it an unmeaning assertion, which St. Paul has repeatedly made, that the Church is one body, united in its many members, and adhering to one head, Jesus Christ? Who ever beheld the eye contending with the hand, or the belly fighting against the foot? In the whole universe, consisting of parts so discordant, there still continues a general harmony. In the animal body there is peace among all the members, and with whatever excellence one member is endowed, it confines not the benefit to itself, but communicates it to all. If any evil happen to one member, the whole body affords it assistance. Can then the mere animal connexion of nature in a material body, formed soon to perish, effect more in preserving harmony than the union of the spirit in a mystical and immortal body? Is it without meaning that we pray, according to the command of Christ, Thy will be done in earth as it is in heaven? In the Kingdom of Heaven there is perfect concord. But Christ intended that his Church should be nothing less than a Celestial Community; a Heaven upon Earth; men who belong to it living, as much as possible, according to the model of the Heavenly kingdom, hastening thither, and feeling and acknowledging their whole dependence upon it for present and future felicity.

It may now be worth while to observe in what manner Christians defend the madness of War.

If, say they, war had been absolutely unlawful, God would not have excited the Jews to wage war against their enemies. I hear

the argument, and observe upon it, that the objector should in justice add, that the Jews scarcely ever waged war, as the Christians do, against each other, but against aliens and infidels. We Christians draw the sword against Christians. To them, a difference in religion, and the worship of strange gods, was the source of contest. We are urged to war either by childish anger, or a hunger and thirst for riches and glory, and oftentimes merely for base and filthy lucre. They fought at the express command of God; we, at the command of our own passions.

But since the time that Jesus Christ said, Put up thy sword into its scabbard, Christians ought not to go to war, unless it be in that most honourable warfare, with the vilest enemies of the Church, the inordinate love of money, anger, and ambition. These are our *Philistines*, these our *Nabuchodonosors*, these our *Moabites* and *Ammonites*, with whom we ought never to make a truce; with these we must engage without intermission till the enemy being utterly extirpated, peace may be firmly established. Unless we subdue such enemies as these, we can neither have peace with ourselves, nor peace with any one else. *This is the only war which tends to produce a real and a lasting peace.* He, who shall have once conquered foes like these, will never wish to wage war with any mortal man upon the face of that earth, on which God placed all men to live, to let live, and to enjoy the life he gave.

I lay no stress on the opinion of those who interpret the two swords given to Peter to mean two powers, the civil and ecclesiastical, claimed by the successors of Peter, since Christ suffered Peter himself to fall into an error in this matter, on purpose that, when he had put up his sword, it might remain no longer a doubt that war was prohibited; which, before that order, had been considered as allowable. But Peter, they allege, did actually use his sword. It is true he did; but while he was still a Jew, and had not yet received the genuine spirit of Christianity. He used his sword, not in support of any disputable claim to property, not to defend goods, chattels, lands, and estates, as we do; nor yet for his own life, but for the life of his Lord and Master. *Let it also be remembered, that he who used the sword in defence of his Master, very soon after denied and renounced that*

Master. If Peter is to be our model, and if we are so much pleased with the example of Peter *fighting* for Christ, we may probably approve also the example of Peter *denying* Christ.

Peter, in using his sword, only made a slip in consequence of the impulse of a sudden passion, yet he was reprimanded. But if Christ approved of this mode of defence, as some most absurdly infer from this transaction, how happens it that the uniform tenour of his whole life and doctrine teaches nothing else but forbearance? Why, when he commissioned his disciples, did he expose them to the despots of the world, armed only with a walking-stick and a wallet, a staff and a scrip? If by that sword, which Christ ordered them, after selling every thing else, to buy, is meant a moderate defence against persecution, as some men ignorantly interpret it, how came it to pass that the Martyrs never used it?

But they urge, that the laws of nature, the laws of society, and the laws of custom and usage, conspire in dictating the propriety of repelling force by force, and defending life, and money too, which is to some persons as dear as life. So much I allow. But Gospel Grace, of more force than all these laws, declares in decisive words, that those who revile us, we must not revile again; that we must do good to them who use us ill; and that we should also pray for them who design to take away our lives. All this, they tell us, had a particular reference to the apostles; but I contend that it also refers to all Christian people, to the whole body, which should be entire and perfect, though one member may have been formerly distinguished by some particular pre-eminence. The doctrine of Christ can, indeed, have no reference to them, who do not expect their reward with Christ.

But they proceed to argue, that as it is lawful to inflict punishment on an individual delinquent, it must also be lawful to take vengeance on an offending State. The full answer to be given to this argument would involve me in greater prolixity than is now requisite. I will only say, that the two cases differ widely in this respect. He who is convicted *judicially*, suffers the punishment which the *laws* impose: but in *war*, each side treats the other side as *guilty*, and proceeds to inflict punishment, regardless of law, judge, or jury. In the former case, the

evil only falls on him who committed the wrong: the benefit of the example redounds to all; in the latter case the greatest part of the very numerous evils falls on those who deserve no evil at all, on husbandmen, on old people, on mothers of families, on orphans, and on defenceless young females. But if any good at all can be gathered from a thing which is itself the worst of all things, the whole of that good devolves to the share of a few most profligate robbers, to the mercenary pillager, to the piratical privateer. It would be better to let the crime of a few go unpunished, than, while we endeavour to chastise one or two by war, in which, perhaps, we may not succeed, to involve our own people, the neighbouring people, and the innocent part of the enemies, (for so I may call the multitude,) in certain calamity. It is better to let a wound alone, which cannot be healed without injury to the whole body. But if any one should exclaim, "that it would be unjust that he who has offended should not suffer condign punishment;" I answer, that it is much more unjust, that so many thousand innocent persons should be called to share the utmost extremity of misfortune which they could not possibly have deserved.

But the objector repeats, "Why may I not go and cut the throats of those who would cut our throats if they could?" Do you then consider it as a disgrace that any should be wickeder than you? Why do you not go and rob thieves? they would rob you if they could. Why do you not revile them that revile you? Why do you not hate them that hate you?

Do you consider it as a noble exploit for a Christian, having killed in war those whom he thinks wicked, but who still are men, for whom Christ died, thus to offer up victims most acceptable to the Devil, and to delight that grand enemy in two instances; first, that a man is slain at all; and secondly, that the man who slew him is a Christian?

If we are willing to conquer for Christ, let us buckle on the sword of the Gospel; let us put on the helmet of salvation, grasp the shield of faith, and be completely clad in apostolical armour, the panoply of heaven. Then will it come to pass, that we shall triumph even in defeat, and when routed in the field, still bear away the palm of a most glorious victory. If we endeavour to be

what we are called, that is, to be violently attached to nothing worldly, to seek nothing here with too anxious a solicitude ; if we endeavour to free ourselves from all that may encumber and impede our flight to heaven ; if we aspire with our most ardent wishes at celestial felicity ; if we place our chief happiness in Christ alone ;—we have certainly, in so doing, made up our minds to believe, that whatever is truly good, truly great, truly delightful, is to be found in his religion. If we are convinced that a good man cannot be essentially hurt by any mortal ; if we have duly estimated the vanity and transitory duration of all the ridiculous things which agitate human beings ; if we have an adequate idea of being so cleansed, by continual meditation, from the pollutions of this world, that when the body is laid down in the dust, one may emigrate to the society of angels : in a word, if we exhibit these three qualities, without which no man can deserve the appellation of a Christian : *Innocence*, that we may be free from vice ; *Charity*, that we may deserve well of all men ; *Patience*, that we may bear with those that use us ill, and, if possible, bury injuries by an accumulation of benefits on the injured party ; I ask, what war can possibly arise hereafter for any trifles which the world contains ?

If the Christian religion be a fable, why do we not honestly and openly explode it ? Why do we glory and take a pride in its name ? But if Christ is “ the way, and the truth, and the life,” why do all our schemes of life and plans of conduct deviate so from this great Exemplar ? If we acknowledge Christ to be our Lord and Master, who is Love itself, and who taught nothing but love and peace, let us exhibit his model ; not by assuming his name, but by our lives and conversation. Let us adopt the love of peace, that Christ may recognize his own, even as we recognize him to be the Teacher of Peace.

*Extract from a Letter addressed by Erasmus to Francis the
First, King of France, anno 1523.*

WHAT can be frailer, more transitory, more exposed to misery, than human life? I dwell not on the great variety of diseases, disasters, accidents, fatal calamities, pestilent sicknesses, lightning, earthquakes, conflagrations, inundations, and other evils which overwhelm it, without limit and without number. Yet, among all the miseries by which man is infested, there is not one more malignant, more mischievous, than War; not one that, like War, does more harm to the *morals* of men, than even to their *property* and *persons*. It is indeed a less injury to deprive me of my life, than of my innocence. Nor is war at all the less detestable, because the greatest portion of its evils falls on the poor and low, on the farmer, the manufacturer, or the wayfaring-man. Our Lord Jesus Christ shed his blood for the redemption of these men, despised as they are, no less than for the redemption of Kings. And when we shall stand before the judgment-seat of Christ, where the most powerful Lords of this world must shortly stand, that impartial Judge will require a no less strict account to be given of those poor and despised ones, than of Despots and Grandees. Therefore they who deem it a trifling loss and injury when the poor and the low are robbed, afflicted, banished, burnt out, oppressed, or put to death, do in truth accuse Jesus Christ, (the wisdom of the Father,) of folly, for shedding his blood to save such wretches as these.

Christ, throughout his whole life, displayed the character of a Saviour, a Comforter, a universal Benefactor. Whether in the temple or the synagogue, whether in public or in private, whether in a ship or in the wilderness, he taught the multitude, he healed the sick, he cleansed the lepers, he restored the paralytic, the lame, the blind; he expelled evil spirits, he raised the dead, he delivered those that were in jeopardy; he fed the hungry; he refuted the Pharisees; he took the part of the disciples, of the poor sinful creature who so lavishly poured out her ointment; he even comforted the guilty and unhappy woman of Canaan, who was detected in the commission of her crime. Review the whole life

of Jesus ; he never did evil to any mortal, though he was himself used so ill, and if he had chosen it, might have revenged himself so amply. He was uniformly the Saviour and the Benefactor. To Malchus he restored the ear which Peter had cut off. He would not suffer his own personal safety to be secured, even by so trifling an injury as that which was done to Malchus. Suspended on the cross, he saved one of the thieves that were crucified with him. After his death he brought over the Centurion to the Christian faith. This was supporting the character of a King, truly so called—*To do good to all, and injury to none.*

